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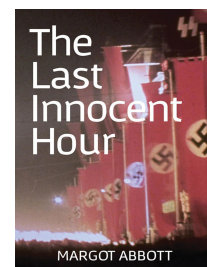


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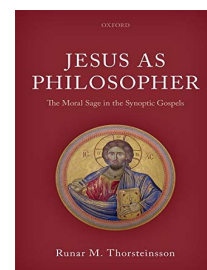
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*Falling for his best  
friend's dad is way  
out of line.*

# *The Nerd &* **THE EX-CON**

**SAGE ABBOTT**

# The Nerd & The Ex-Con

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# CONTENT WARNING

Please be advised that while the tone of 'The Nerd & The Ex-Con' is not extremely angsty, the book explores themes and events that may be sensitive for some readers. This includes:

- Physical and emotional abuse stemming from a previous relationship.
- Instances of physical and sexual harassment by a former partner.
- A main character's history as an ex-convict on parole for voluntary manslaughter.
- Themes of parental neglect and abandonment.
- A depiction of a parental overdose.

While these elements are integral to the characters' pasts and the story's depth, they are handled with care, and the overall tone of the book is more uplifting than these warnings might suggest. Reader discretion is advised.

# PROLOGUE

GRIFF

## *Seven years ago*

“Burke, you’ve got mail!”  
No one was more surprised than me when the correctional officer handed me a long yellow envelope, the flap open because of their inspection. I stared at my name written in bold letters, looking all neat and shit, and had a hard time processing that I had mail.

In the eleven years I’d been locked up, I’d never received any letters, although I sent them regularly.

“Thanks,” I mumbled and put the envelope on the table.

My cellmate, Grant, nudged me with his elbow. “Well, look at you. Who’s it from?”

Only one person could be sending me mail, but the return address wasn’t his. I frowned. The name wasn’t familiar. I didn’t know any Scott. Did I? It’d been so long since I’d seen other people than my fellow inmates and the guards that I couldn’t remember all those I’d interacted with when I was a free man.

“Have no idea.”

“Then open it.”

I swallowed and stared at the envelope. *Who are you, Scott Dischinger?* Only one way to find out. I’d seen inmates, sentenced for some of the most heinous crimes, receive fan letters from people who were obsessed with them, but my case had been low profile. No reason a random stranger should be writing to me.

I shook out the single sheet of paper. A thumbprint at the bottom, which must have been left behind by the correctional officer, distracted from the otherwise pristine look of the sheet. I unfolded the letter, which was all formal looking. The words were scribbled in neat handwriting. Every letter had been precisely formed.

*Dear Mr. Burke,*

*You aren’t familiar with me, but it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. Before you wonder too much what a stranger is doing contacting you, I’d like to introduce myself. My name’s Scott, and I’m the best friend of your son, Jay. We’ve been best buds since the fifth grade.*

*Quite frankly, none of this is my business, but I care about your son and, I guess, as an extension, you as well. I would do anything in the world to make him happy, even if he’ll be mad later when he finds out that I reached out to you.*

*Over the years, I’ve watched Jay throw out each letter you sent him. He forbade me from ever reading them, but I got curious, and one day I stole one of the letters. I hope you can forgive me for reading it, but it was killing me inside, not knowing why he got so upset each time a letter appeared. After reading the letter for his birthday, I understood.*

*I’m sorry, but Jay never talks about you. It’s not because he doesn’t want to. He’s hurt and angry, so he never opens your letters. He’s not a bad guy, and I love him, but he can be a bit stubborn, so I’ve decided to step in the middle and fill in the gaps for both of you. For you at least. I can’t ever let Jay know I’m doing this. I’m sorry about that.*

*However, I can update you about your son and how he’s doing, if you don’t mind hearing from a third party. I’ve enclosed a picture of him. It’s not much, but I hope it’s somewhat helpful. I can’t imagine what it’s like for you not knowing what he looks like now.*

Picture? What picture?

I shook out the envelope, and a photo fell on the table. I snatched it up and stared at the picture of my little boy. Not so little now. He was eighteen and looked nothing like me, although he had blue eyes. He resembled his mother with that oval face, the arch of his thin eyebrows, and the smile on his lips.

My throat thickened, and tears gathered in my eyes. I blinked them away. There was no place for tears in the rec room. Had I been in my cell, I would have let them fall.

My son. I hadn't seen a photo of him in eleven years. How much he'd grown. And I hadn't been there for any of his special moments.

"Who's that?" Grant asked.

"He's my kid."

"Your son?" He shuffled closer and peered at the photo. "He's handsome. Looks nothing like you."

I laughed. "I know. That's his momma right there. I can't believe it. Look how grown he is."

"Gonna be a heartbreaker too. All the mothers better lock up their daughters."

"Actually, I think he might be gay," I said, lowering my voice. "This letter seems to be from his boyfriend."

"Yeah? You not freaked out or anything?"

"No. I just want to know he's happy." After everything I'd put him and his mother through, he deserved to be happy.

"There you have it." Grant slapped my shoulder. "You're fine with what he does in his bedroom, so the next time Julio wants to suck your dick, it shouldn't be such a hard decision to make. No pussy around. We gotta make do somehow."

Unlike Grant, who'd had his fair share of "prison bitches," I hadn't touched a soul in here. Some men laughed that they had nothing better to do, so why not? I'd rather jerk off, though, than bend one of these guys over.

It did nothing for me.

I picked the letter back up and continued reading.

*Jay's smart too. He wants to study to be a doctor. It might take him a while, but I fully believe he will do it. He's very determined. I think you'll like that. Overall, you should be a very proud father. Your son is an amazing human being.*

*If you have any questions, you can send them to me in a letter or email me at [scottiemchottiejr@gmail.com](mailto:scottiemchottiejr@gmail.com). I saw online that inmates are allowed access to computers to keep in touch with their family. Since it's faster than a letter, feel free to email me at any time, and I'll get back to you.*

*Also, I apologize if I overstepped a boundary, but I hope this letter makes you happy.*

*Your son's best friend,*

*Scottie*

He'd overstepped of course in reading the letter I'd sent to my son, but he'd also made me the happiest man alive by responding and sending me a photograph of my boy. How could I be upset? This Scottie guy sounded like he cared deeply for my son. It was good he had someone like that in his life, and now I did too.

For some reason, Scottie seemed to be on my side, and I would try everything in my power to keep him there for these updates about my son.

SCOTTIE

“Scottie!”  
I cringed at Jay’s yell. Having come from a family who wouldn’t shout, even if the house were on fire, I had to get used to my boisterous friend. After over a decade of friendship, I still winced when he made sudden loud noises—like bellowing my name over the ringing doorbell.

The door to my bedroom was flung open, and Jay slid across the floor, courtesy of the multicolored diamond print socks he had on. I picked my glasses up from the dresser and slipped them up my nose. He was only wearing underwear and his shirt, and trying with big, clumsy fingers to get the buttons into the holes.

“Someone’s at the door,” he said. “Can you get it? Don’t want to scare the hell out of that Jehovah’s Witness lady like last time.”

My lips twitched into a grin. Jay was the one who made things interesting. He spiced up my staid and ordinary life with his antics. If only it had panned out when we’d flirted and fooled around when we were younger. We didn’t feel that way about each other, though, which was just as well. I needed a true friend more than I needed another lying, cheating, abusive scumbag of a boyfriend.

Thank god for Jay, who’d helped me out of a dire situation when he insisted I move in with him a year ago. Since a distant relative from his mother’s side had willed the house to him, all I had to do was help with the utilities.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get it.” I grabbed my brand new navy blue peacoat and car keys. “And you need to hurry, or you’re going to be late for your first day on the job. You really should work on your tardiness, you know.”

“Stop nagging, Mom. Now you see why I had to quit medical school. I’d be late getting to the patient on the operating table.” I walked out of the bedroom. “Then simply don’t be late.”

“You’d think it’s that easy, wouldn’t you?”

“It *is* that easy.” I trod down the stairs. “Stop staying up late playing video games, and wake up half an hour earlier.”

“I’ll try tomorrow.”

No, he wouldn’t. We’d had this conversation before.

The doorbell rang again, longer this time, like the person on the other side was leaning into it. As if that weren’t enough, they pounded on the door as well. What was wrong with people? Couldn’t they wait for someone to answer the door?

I shrugged, unlocked the door, and opened it.

“Who could be so impolite as to—” I swallowed the rest of my chastisement at the sight of the man standing on the doorstep. And what a man.

I came in at just five feet two, and most people towered over me, but this man must have been over six feet. I barely came up to his chest. A ripped chest that his white T-shirt couldn’t hide. The sweat spots on the front and under the armpits caused the material to stick to delicious-looking abs I wanted to poke.

Dang, but who was he? A delivery man? Because I would have to ensure I get a delivery every day of the week if they were sending guys like these out now. All I usually got were ashy knees and skinny legs. This man’s thighs covered in tight denim could squeeze the life out of me.

Why did that sound so hot?

“What’s that?” he growled, his voice gravelly and hard.

Since when did my fairy godmother give a crap about my dream man?

“Umm, what’s what?”

“You were saying something about impolite.”

Intense blue eyes that looked familiar, even though I’d never met him before, stared into mine. I couldn’t look away. His hair seemed freshly cut, and he had a neatly trimmed mustache and beard. The sliver of silver that threaded through the dark hair made me hold on to the door tightly.



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Oh crap, if gray hair could turn me on like this, I needed a Tinder hookup ASAP. This was embarrassing.

“Umm, just that it’s impolite to beat on someone’s door and ring their doorbell like that.”

“Sorry. Just checking someone was actually home. I should have called first, but…”

“Scottie, who is it?” Jay yelled down the stairs.

“I’m still checking!”

“Scottie?” The man widened his eyes and swept his gaze slowly up and down my frame and back up again. “Scottie McHottie?”

Scottie McHottie.

Scottie McHottie.

Scottie McHottie.

Heat seared my face. Nearly flayed me right down to the bone.

Oh.

My.

God.

Only one person knew me by that stupid name. The one person I was certain I would never meet face-to-face so he wouldn’t see I was more of a Scottie *McNottie*. As in the guy no one would ever want to date because he wasn’t real. The fun, sexy, worldly cool guy I’d pretended to be all these years in my letters to him didn’t exist.

“Gr-Griff?” I mumbled his name with stiff lips. He couldn’t be Griffin Burke. That Griff was behind bars, serving life in prison.

“Fuck me sideways. It *is* you.” He stared at me, looking as shocked as I felt. “You’re *my* Scottie?”

*My Scottie.*

My jaw went slack, and I might have ejaculated a little in my briefs. No one had ever called me their anything before, and when this sexy man uttered it so casually, I was prime and loaded to go off at any time.

“I-I-I don’t understand.” My tongue kept sticking to the roof of my mouth, making it difficult to get the words out. “You’re in prison. You can’t be here on my doorstep.”

If I’d known he would one day show up, I would never have replied to his letter to Jay. I would never have kept in touch with him all these years, and I certainly would never have fed him those lies, which had somehow filtered into my letters. They’d started as me keeping him up to date about Jay and had gradually evolved to me talking about myself.

“I won my appeal,” he replied. “I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure if my sentence would stick and then I wanted it to be a…surprise.”

He had certainly succeeded. I couldn’t be any more surprised had my mother been standing in front of me. And she’d been dead for two years.

“I-you—”

“Scottie, I’m almost finished!” Jay yelled. “Don’t you dare leave without me. My car’s still at the garage.”

Griff’s eyes shifted toward the staircase behind me. His jaw ticked and his nose twitched. He seemed nervous.

“Is that him?” he asked. “Is that my son?”

I nodded. “Yes, but he can’t know you’re here.”

“Why not?”

Footsteps clattered upstairs. Oh god, Jay couldn’t see him. I grabbed a fistful of Griff’s shirt and tried to turn him around, but he was way too big for me to move him even an inch. He frowned, and as the footsteps started down the stairs, I trembled.

“Please. If Jay finds out you’re here, he’ll never forgive me.”

“I’m his—”

“We’ll figure something out, but for now, please get into the closet.”

I released his shirt, stepped back, and yanked open the door to the coat closet.

Griff raised his eyebrows. “You expect me to fit in there?”

“You don’t have a choice.” I pushed my glasses back up my nose. “If you want to have any form of relationship with your son, then you’ll fit.”

He cursed under his breath and moved toward the closet. “Only because I trust you, Scottie.” He glared at me. “Despite everything.”

Despite all my lies. The photograph I’d sent him. Chestnut curls, brown eyes, and a personality that shone even from a two-dimensional shot was the opposite of who I was in person. Pale, freckled, blond, and blue-eyed. I had the face of a cherub, or so people said. A face that looked way too innocent and inexperienced.

He shuffled into the closet, and he hadn’t been kidding. He barely fit, and when I shoved the door shut, he grunted and cursed.

“Shh.”

Why did this have to happen to me? I’d done a good thing keeping a father abreast of what was going on in his son’s life.

*I have only one rule in this friendship, Scott. Don't mention my father. Ever.*

I'd done more. I'd violated Jay's privacy by pulling out a letter he'd discarded into the trash can. I hadn't meant to deceive him all this time. The way he'd get moody after each letter had made me feel bad for him. How could I make him feel better if I didn't know what was wrong? So I'd snooped, and when I'd read the heartfelt letter his father had sent him, the words had touched me, leading me to make the stupidest decision ever.

I'd written back to his father. And had kept writing to him for seven years.

"Look, I'm all dapper." Jay jumped down the last two steps and held his arms wide. "Am I good looking or what?"

I rolled my eyes. "You don't need me to feed your ego. You get enough of that already."

"Ah, don't be jealous. You know you're the most important person in my life." Jay crushed me to his chest in a hug. Damn, he was almost as big as his father.

"Why don't you warm the car up and take it out of the garage?" I jangled my key at him. "I'll double-check we've locked up properly, then meet you in the driveway."

"No prob." He took the key from me. "By the way, who was that at the door?"

"Uh, some random kid selling cookies."

"And you didn't get me any? Damn, Scottie, that's cold." He chuckled and walked away. I collapsed against the wall, removed my glasses, and swiped the sweat off my brow.

That had been way too close.

The closet door opened, and Griff stumbled out, a scowl on his face.

"Why are you letting him leave? I need to talk to him."

"But he's not ready to talk to you yet."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I know him better than anyone else in this world. We've been together for a long time, okay? Trust me, he's not ready to face you yet."

He waved a hand up and down. "You've lied to me. How do I know anything you've said over the last ten years is true?"

"I-I'm sorry." I shuffled my feet. "I didn't think you'd get out of prison."

I swallowed hard. An ex-convict was standing in my hall. An ex-convict who had taken someone's life. To not cloud my judgment about him, I hadn't looked up who he'd killed and what had led to him committing such a crime, but now my stomach churned. Writing to him in prison had been safe. We had walls, streets, towns separating us, but here he was, standing before me, a man who had snuffed out a life.

He could snuff me out right there if he wanted to.

I took a step back, confused, afraid, and somehow excited all in one.

*What's wrong with me? This man's dangerous.*

What if he'd escaped from prison?

"Did you escape from prison?" As soon as the words were out, I regretted them. He wouldn't have admitted it if he had, and now he knew that I didn't trust him.

"I told you I got out the right way." He caught my chin, his fingertips burning my skin. Warmth spread throughout my chest and lower. "You don't have to be afraid of me. I owe you one for keeping me up to date about Jay, but that doesn't change the fact that you've lied to me."

A car horn blasted in the driveway, and I jumped. "I can explain everything, but not now. I have to go before Jay gets suspicious."

"Then meet me tonight so we can talk." He dug a burner phone out of his pocket and handed it to me. "Here, put your number in, and I'll text you the time and where to meet me later."

"But it's a weekday."

"And?"

My cheeks flamed. I took the phone from him. Of course the Scottie he knew was daring and got up to all sorts of shenanigans, while the real me had a bedtime that didn't extend beyond ten during the week. I needed a full eight-hour sleep to function the next day.

"Here." I gave him back his phone and grasped the doorknob. "Wait until we're gone, and then you can leave. Twist the lock on your way out."

I turned the doorknob, but his hand landed on my shoulder. "Scottie."

I swallowed and forced a deep breath into my lungs, then glanced at him over my shoulder. "Yes?"

"Despite everything, it's nice to finally meet you. I don't know why you lied, but I can tell you're a good person."

Scottie had lied to me. He was nothing at all like the photograph he'd sent me, and I couldn't make up my mind if that was good or bad.

From where I sat, I watched him enter the pub. He'd gone home to change and was now wearing a pair of black jeans that made him look even skinnier than this morning and a red vest over a long-sleeved green shirt. He loosened the thick navy wool scarf from around his slender neck, tugging at the material almost nervously as he scanned the interior of the dimly lit pub.

He looked younger than his age. Or maybe his age had been a lie too. How much of what he'd told me about himself could I believe, and what if he'd lied to me about my son? For years I'd taken comfort in the information he wrote to me about Jay.

Scottie spotted me, and his hands stilled on the scarf. He dropped them, then raised the right and fiddled with his glasses. They looked cute on him. He approached the bar, not at all like the image I'd had of him all these years.

Was he even old enough to drink?

"Hi." He gave me a little wave. He rocked on his heels, unable to stand still. Was he nervous? Well, he should be. His gaze flicked back and forth like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

He wasn't going anywhere. Not until we talked at least.

I used my foot to pull out the chair next to mine. "Sit."

He swallowed, the movement emphasized by his pale throat adorned with a simple black choker. "Yes, sir."

My breath got trapped inside my lungs, and I furrowed my brow. Was it how he said "sir" in that low register of his or the way the choker clung to his neck? The simple piece of jewelry reminded me a long time had passed since I held someone down for a real proper fuck.

My dick twitched.

What the hell was that about?

Scottie folded his bottom lip between his teeth—bracketed by purple braces—and drummed his fingers on top of the bar. The bartender rushed forward, probably assuming Scottie was impatient, not realizing he was nervous.

"What can I get you?" the man asked.

"Whiskey. Make it neat, thank you."

"I'll need to see some ID."

Scottie's cheeks flamed. "I'm twenty-five!"

"You don't look it. Either I see your ID, or you take a Coke."

Scottie mumbled under his breath and fished his driver's license out of his wallet. The bartender took a long look at it and at Scottie, then handed it back. "One scotch coming up."

At least he was legal. He hadn't lied about his age.

The bartender returned with his drink, and Scottie politely thanked him. Instead of drinking, though, he kept his hand wrapped around the glass. He stared at me long and hard. I didn't say anything, just let him, but I silently questioned the flutters his curious gaze set off in my gut.

"Is it really you?" he asked softly. "Are you really Griff?"

"It's me."

"When did you get out?"

"A few weeks ago. Took me a while to get here and find a temporary place to stay."

"Oh." He finally took a sip of his drink, made a face, and put down the glass. "So...you're not staying?"

"I am staying. My son is here."

"Of course." He gulped down some more of the scotch, and his eyes watered behind his glasses. Why was he still pretending to be someone he wasn't? It was almost as if he wasn't comfortable being himself.

"You see, I don't think Jay will be happy about this."

“But you don’t know that for a fact.”

“It makes sense, though. He threw away every letter you sent him.”

Didn’t he think I’d considered my son’s rejection all this time? I couldn’t even blame Jay. My actions had forced him to grow up without a father. *And* without a competent mother too. She’d overdosed, leaving him to be raised by relatives. If the stuff Scottie had told me in his letters were true.

“I still have to try, and you’re going to help me.”

When he reached for the glass again, I couldn’t take it anymore. I snatched it from his hand and flung back the liquid all at once. He gaped at me. I signaled the bartender, who came over instantly. It was a slow night at the bar.

“I’d like a Coke.” I gave him back the glass.

Scottie’s face was so red I would have laughed if he hadn’t irritated me. Our letters had been easy. I’d come to anticipate getting them every month. We had exchanged over a hundred letters, and he still acted as if I were a stranger when he was the one who’d lied to me.

“Why did you pretend to be someone you’re not? Why are you still doing it now?”

He squirmed in the chair and fiddled with his glasses. “I’m not—”

“Scottie, don’t make me put you over my knee in front of a bar full of people.”

His mouth fell open wide. The bartender placed the Coke in front of him and frowned.

“You okay over here?” he asked Scottie.

I nailed him with a scowl for him to mind his business, but he ignored me until Scottie nodded, then walked away.

“You’ve never drunk a day in your life, have you?”

He straightened his spine. “I have…” His shoulders sagged. “Not.”

“Then what are you doing ordering a scotch?”

He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth and released it. “The Internet says it’s a safe drink to order at a bar.”

“Not for a new drinker. First the photograph and now this. Why did you send that picture?” Especially when the real version of him was so much better. This man sitting next to me fit the image of someone who’d gone out of his way to keep me informed about my kid for the last nine years better than the guy with the cocky smirk in the photo he’d sent me.

“I… I don’t know.”

“You *do* know, but we’ll come back to that. What else did you lie about?”

“I’m so sorry. I thought you’d never be released, and I didn’t want you to worry.”

My body went rigid. “What did you do?”

“There are a few things you should know first, but before I tell you, you have to promise me you won’t try to see Jay until I say he’s ready.”

“I’m not agreeing to that.”

“You have to. I need time to come clean to him about what I did. I have to be honest with him.”

“Do you go through life being a liar, or is this a special effect reserved only for the Burke men?”

“Now that’s not fair,” he snapped, blue eyes flashing. “Most of what I told you is true. And if I fibbed, it’s because I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. If you’re going to judge me all night, then I’ll go. You can screw up everything with Jay if you want. See if I care anymore!”

So the pretty, mousy boy with the braces at the ripe age of twenty-five had claws. Interesting. Maybe not everything he’d told about himself had been lies.

Before he could get up, I placed my hand over his.

“Don’t go.”

He curled his fingers into a fist. “Are you going to keep bringing up what I did?”

“I don’t understand it. Eventually, we’ll have to talk about it, but the important thing right now is Jay and how to get through to him.”

He relaxed his hand until his palm was flat on the bar with mine still over it. Human contact wasn’t something I’d had much of a choice in behind bars. I’d been prodded and searched at a stranger’s whim. My hand over Scottie’s was my choice. I hadn’t touched anyone this way since I’d been out.

That must be the reason I didn’t want to let go.

“Yeah, Jay’s still upset when someone mentions you.” He cocked his head to the side as if apologizing. “All I want is a week or so to let him know that I’ve been writing to you. He’ll be upset, naturally, so I’ll need another few days to break it to him that you’re out.”

“This sounds like it’s going to take forever.”

“Why didn’t you say in your last letter that you might get out?”

“Like I’d said, I wanted it to be a surprise.”

I did. At first, I’d kept the appeal from him, not wanting him to get his hopes up. Thoughts of how Scottie would react when he saw me in the flesh had consumed me.

He'd never come to the prison to meet me in person, always making some excuse for not being able to. Now I knew why.

"I wasn't completely truthful about Jay's life," he said. "He isn't in medical school. He dropped out of college during his second year of his nursing program. Said it didn't feel right and he wanted to find himself. He's been a bit of a free spirit since."

"Free spirit? What does that mean exactly?"

Shit. This wasn't going exactly the way I'd thought. The lies Scottie had told me had let me believe that my kid hadn't turned out to be a screwup like his dad. I'd been proud when I learned he was studying to become a doctor.

"He bounces around jobs. Don't get me wrong. He's a great guy. The absolute best. Why, when my ex hit..." He sucked in a deep breath. "Anyway, he's great."

"No, wait, you were saying something about your ex?"

"It's not important. Just that Jay has been there for me, and I want to be there for him, so please let me do this right."

"Fine." I sighed and downed the rest of my beer. "But I'm only giving you a week to tell him. I've missed too much of his life already."

"I guess I better find a new apartment."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been living with Jay for over a year, but I'm sure he'll ask me to leave when he finds out what I did. He has two rules—never to mention you or touch the letters you send him."

I winced, the hole in my heart that had closed up with each of Scottie's letters now widening again. What if Jay didn't come around and insisted he wanted nothing to do with me? I'd survived prison for this moment of making things right with my son, but was that even possible?

"I'm sure he'll come around." Scottie slipped his hand from beneath mine, but instead of pulling it away, he laid his hand over mine. He gently caressed my skin absentmindedly. "It's one thing for him to reject your letters. Those were easy to write, but when he sees you in person, he'll realize how serious you are about reconciling."

Scottie smiled, lips parting to reveal his teeth. He was breathtakingly beautiful when he smiled like that.

Beautiful?

Since when did I consider other men beautiful?

Yet something about him unsettled me like nothing had in a long time. We had seven years of history between us.

Scottie's eyes clashed with mine, and he stopped brushing the back of my hand. His smile dropped, and he clamped his lips together as if he realized he'd shown me his braces. He snatched his hand away too and fiddled with his scarf.

"I should go."

"Already? You just got here."

"I-is there something else you wanted to talk about?"

"I thought we could catch up."

"I really wish I could, but I can't."

No explanation at all. Was he still afraid of me? If he was, he wouldn't have come tonight, would he?

"You'll let me know how things are going with Jay?"

He nodded and hopped down from the bar stool. "Sure thing."

"And you're sure you can't stay for another drink?" I needed more time to figure him out.

"Maybe next time."

I waved the bartender over to settle my bill. "I'll walk you to your car."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

I quickly paid and left the bartender a generous tip. Although he was still watching us suspiciously as if he thought I had ulterior motives for bringing Scottie here tonight. I held Scottie by the upper arm and guided him to the exit.

"Griff, you're walking too fast."

Scottie was huffing to catch up with my long strides. I slowed down my pace. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Most people forget I have short legs."

I held the door open for him, and he slipped out ahead of me. He barely came up to my chest, and something about that made my breath hitch. The guy in the photograph he'd sent me was much taller and broadly built. The fun-sized boy in front of me wouldn't have lasted a day in prison. He would have been passed around like the common cold.

My chest swelled with emotions—emotions that astonished, confused, and intrigued me. It might have been close to twenty years since I'd touched anyone, but I still knew what desire was. I just never expected it to hit me like this.

Before prison, I'd only been with women, and while on the inside, I never took up the offers I got. I'd never even been tempted by an offered mouth, preferring to beat my dick alone.

"That's my car." Scottie pointed at a compact blue Honda Civic hatchback. It was the same car Jay had been driving this morning when they left the house.



When a car sped past us, I took his elbow and pulled him back. He stumbled against my chest, and I wrapped my other arm around his waist to steady him. He planted a fist against my chest, and time stood still. Neither of us moved, even after the car was long gone.

He tilted his head back—all the way back. I couldn't see his eyes clearly behind his glasses, and I wanted to remove them. It felt like he was hiding from me behind them, but he'd hidden for so many years. Wasn't it time he was truthful about himself? I wasn't freaking out about this undeniable chemistry between us. Was it the years spent talking to him that had created a bond between us?

Whatever the hell it was, it was real, and I could be truthful to myself about that.

A snowflake fluttered onto his glasses, and he pulled back. I released him. Without a word, he scurried across the street. I followed at a more sedate pace just so I could take my fill of him.

Like a predator stalking his prey.

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god,” I whispered as I forced my hand into the pocket of my skinny jeans to grab my car key. Behind me, I could feel Griff’s presence, and I needed to get away before I made a bigger fool of myself than I already had.

What had possessed me to order scotch? Should have known he would see right through me. I was a capable, grown man. I had a decent job working at a bank. I contributed to utilities and groceries. Every year, I filed my and Jay’s taxes on time.

Why did Griff make me want to duck behind the nearest object and hide?

*Get it together, Scottie.*

“You need some help there?” Griff asked, way closer than I’d imagined.

“N-nope. I got it.” I hooked my finger into the key ring and yanked it out of my pocket. Yes! One triumph for the night. I wiggled it so he could see, and the keychain flew off my finger and hit the ground. “Oops.”

I bent to pick up the key. At the same time, so did he. Our heads collided like walnuts and a hammer. He didn’t even shift on his feet while I tumbled over. Griff caught me before I hit the ground, and as if I weighed nothing, he scooped up the key and me.

“You all right?” He set me on my feet and gripped my chin. His hand was icy, a good excuse for me to brush it away and duck my head. My cheeks burned, and I didn’t want him to see how red my face must have gotten.

“I’m fine.” I fixed my glasses and rubbed my forehead. Darn it, banging my head on his hurt. Why did he look like he hadn’t been affected at all?

“You don’t look so fine. Lemme see.” His hand returned to my chin, and I squirmed. “Stand still.”

“Ye-yes, sir.”

Air hissed through his teeth. I raised a hand and pressed it to his chest to keep him at a distance. He was way too close, and I already couldn’t breathe. Did I even have my inhaler in the car? It’d been a while since I’d needed it.

Griff nudged my chin upward to see better. His hand was rough on my skin. His touch left tingles on my flesh.

“That’s probably going to leave a bump.”

I glanced up at him, just as he lowered his face. Electricity crackled between us. Oh god, he was going to kiss me. *Griff’s going to kiss me.* Chapped lips from the cold and all, I puckered up and closed my eyes, giving myself a boost up on my toes. He was so much taller. I tightened my hand on his shirt, bunching the material up into my fist, and squeezed. My breath hitched in my throat, and nervous anticipation zinged through me.

*I’m about to kiss Griff.*

Seconds ticked by, and nothing but the frigid night air caressed my lips. Huh? I squinted one eye open and found Griff frowning at me. His lips, unlike mine, weren’t puckered up for the kiss I’d thought he was about to give me.

Mortified, I squeezed my eyes shut tight. How to get out of this?

I swooned.

What else was I supposed to do? I faked a swoon that should have put some distance between us, but he caught me. Again. A big, muscular arm slid around my back and kept me from hitting the ground.

“If you’re going to fake fainting,” Griff chuckled. “To make it work, you’ll have to release your death grip on my shirt first.”

Fig Newtons, he was right!

I blinked my eyes open. Griff’s stare trapped the nonsensical words that would have spilled from my lips. How could I have been wrong about the kiss? The energy between us... the way he was looking at me. Was it all one-sided?

“Oh!”

Hands planted on my hips, Griff swept me off my feet and plunked me down onto the hood of my car.

“What—”

He lowered his head, and this time his lips were on mine. At the last second, I pressed my lips shut. And stared at him. I

couldn't look away. Griff was kissing me.

"Open up, Scottie," he murmured.

Hypnotized by his honeyed words, I parted my lips. Surely, he would retreat when he encountered my braces. But he took his time, keeping his tongue away from the metal and delving straight for mine. The tension eased out of my shoulders, and I grabbed his shirt and moaned into his mouth. My nipples tingled against my shirt. I wanted him to lay me down on the car and take me right there.

I clenched my ass and shifted my hand lower, grazing the bulge at the front of his jeans. Jumping Jerry Springer, *that* was because of me? I spread my legs open and urged him to come closer.

"Get a room already! Nobody needs to see that!"

At the angry tone, I flinched and jerked my head back.

"Ouch." Griff stepped back and inspected his tongue, blooming red.

Horried, I jumped down from the hood of the car. "Oh my god, I'm sorry." I hopped from foot to foot, wanting to move closer to him to inspect how bad it was, but fear kept me back. What if he got mad? My gaze dropped to his hands. They were so big. They could really hurt me.

"I-I have to go." I grabbed the door handle and yanked it, but it didn't budge.

"Scottie, calm down. The door's locked."

"It's getting late, and I really need to go. May I have the key, please?"

"Sure. Here you go."

He extended his hand, and I hesitated. I didn't want to touch him. Something was going on here, and it couldn't happen. He was Jay's father.

Oh, nutcracker! I'd made out with Jay's father on my car.

The need to get away from him made touching him worth it. I pretended a zing didn't race up my arm and that I hadn't tasted his blood from where my braces had cut his tongue.

"Scottie, are you safe to drive?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I laughed, the sound too high-pitched even for me. "I've been driving since I was sixteen. Passed the driver's exam on the first go."

"I know. You told me."

Right. This was the man I'd been writing my deepest secrets and desires to. Oh my god. Some of those letters... what the hell had I been thinking? He was a stranger. Who went into as many details as I did to another man about his sex life? A stranger at that. A stranger in prison.

No, it couldn't be that bad.

I tried to convince myself. I had to, or I could never see him ever again. I unlocked the car and jumped inside. Griff caught the door before I could close it.

"We should—"

"I'll let you know when I tell Jay!" I said. "But I really should go, Griff. Good night."

He sighed and nodded. "Fine. Good night. Drive—"

I pulled the door shut and buckled my seat belt while I put the car in Drive. I pressed on the gas, and the car shot backward. Right into the wall with a loud crash. My body hurtled forward, but the seat belt kept me in place.

The rear windshield shattered, littering the back seat with glass. Trembling, I put the car into Park. The door was flung open from the other side, and Griff poked his head in.

"Scott! Are you hurt?" He leaned forward and unbuckled my seat belt.

"I-I'm fine." Shaken up at how stupid I'd been, but fine. "I'm okay."

Griff helped me out of the car. A few people had wandered out of the bar but didn't seem particularly interested. Just the world's biggest idiot ramming his new car into a wall. Nothing new to see.

"What the hell happened?" Griff growled.

I took a step back. My noodles—because calling them legs would be misleading—wobbled, and I almost went down. Griff caught me. Yet again.

Ugh, I wasn't a damsel in distress.

I straightened my spine and locked my knees. "It was a stupid mistake." I looked at the disaster of my car. "I'm so stupid."

"Stop that. You're not." He brushed a lock of hair from my forehead. Why did he make it seem so natural? He should stop doing that too. He just made me want to cling to him like a koala and bawl for wrecking my car. It wasn't even a month old yet. "I know you made the dean's list in college and graduated top of your class for your finance degree."

I scoffed.

"You made a mistake, that's all. We all do."

But not as many as the ones I did tonight. "I need to call someone."

"Do you have AAA?"

*Yes, that's who I should call.*

I nodded.

“Let me take care of it.”

“I can handle it myself.”

“Scottie, you've just been in an accident. You might not have been hurt, but you must be pretty shaken up.” He took me by the shoulder and walked me away from the car to a low wall that ran the perimeter of the property. “Sit right here and let me take care of everything.”

He made it sound so easy. I sat and wrapped my arms around my legs.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “You can have my jacket?”

“I already have one on.”

“You still look cold. You're so skinny that a strong wind might blow you away.” He shrugged off his jacket and draped it over my shoulder.

“How much does this weigh?” I mused. “One pound? Will that stop the wind from blowing me away?”

Griff chuckled. “Feisty. I like that. Keep it up, and I'll know you're okay. Now stop distracting me with your sass, and let me handle your business.”

I handed him my phone with the number, and he walked toward the car with the device pressed to his ear. Too bad the business I'd wanted him to take care of earlier was me.

He got my papers out of the car, and when he returned to my side, he gave me the phone back. “They're sending someone out. Should be here in ten. Let's at least wait inside the bar. It's warmer.”

I nodded and followed him inside, where we found a table close to the door.

“Why are you so nervous?” Griff asked. “It's just me, Scottie.”

I rubbed a hand at the side of my neck and glanced away. This was the Scottie he had to accept. Not the brave, daring guy I'd pretended to be in our letters. This Scottie took time to make decisions and always weighed the pros and the cons before doing anything important.

Like kissing my best friend's father.

That had been written all over it.

“I should let Jay know what happened.” I unlocked my phone and pulled up Jay's number. I typed in a few quick lines of explanation and sent the message. When I locked my phone and turned to Griff, he was frowning. He looked... distant and withdrawn.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

Regretting the kiss?

He shook his head but didn't expound. He kept glancing at the door like he wanted to go. Was he only sticking around to help me because of what I'd done for him in prison?

Was that the real reason he'd kissed me? To make me not feel bad for misinterpreting the movement of his head earlier?

“You can go, you know. I'll handle everything when they get here.”

“I can't do that. Not after all you've done for me. And I'm sure Jay would want me to look out for you. I didn't get a chance to do that with him, but I can do this instead.”

“Oh.” He was only doing this because Jay was my friend. Yeah, that didn't make me feel better at all.

My phone vibrated, and I answered it. The AAA guys were here. Griff raised his eyebrows, and I nodded. Why was it so easy to understand him? When it didn't have to do with my misplaced desire.

We exited the bar to meet the tow truck. I mostly hung in the background while Griff handled things. He just took control without even asking. Not that I was complaining. In fact, I liked it a little too much.

I'd never known what he looked like before. Jay didn't have any pictures of him lying around. Writing letters to him every month had been exciting. I might have even had a silly crush on the man I'd thought him to be based on our conversations, but this—I would never have expected this hot-as-sin older man who kissed like a god.

“All right, that's taken care of.” Griff and I watched the tow truck haul away my car. A little whimper left me. I needed my car to get to work.

“I'd better call an Uber,” I said.

“What for? I'll give you a ride.”

I waved my hand. “I couldn't. You've already done so much.”

“You know things would be easier if I just pick you up and—”

“Don't you dare! I'm not a child.”

He swept his gaze from my head to toe and back up. “I can see that.”

What was that supposed to mean now? I swallowed hard. Our kiss from earlier and the way it'd made me feel, swirled in my head.

“Okay,” I mumbled. “It's not that far anyway.”

“Good. You know, you weren’t this difficult to handle in your letters.”

I pouted and followed him. “In your letters, you weren’t ordering me around.”

He was walking too fast again, and I wasn’t going to run after him. He seemed to have realized that on his own, though, and slowed down.

“Thought you enjoyed being ordered around.”

Oh, fudge sticks and popsicles. Those things I’d mentioned in my letter were as bad as I’d feared.

I tried to laugh it off. “I think we’ve established I said a lot in those letters that stretched the truth a little.”

He harrumphed, the only response I got out of him. Griff stopped, and I stared at the black motorcycle in front of us.

“Wait a minute.” I stepped back. “*That’s* what you rode here?”

“Yeah. What’s the problem?”

“I can’t get on that.”

Just looking at it made my lungs lose all their air.

“Why not?” He unlocked the helmet from the handlebars and extended it to me. “Here you go.”

I eyed the thing that looked way too big for my head. “B-b-but it’s a motorcycle. I don’t know how to ride a motorcycle.”

“That’s why you’re taking the bitch seat.”

I sputtered, my face growing hot. “What did you just call me?”

“Not you, the seat back there. That’s what it’s called.”

“Oh.” How... disappointing.

“I thought you wanted to be daring Scottie McHottie.” He grinned, displaying perfect rows of teeth. “You won’t back down, will you?”

“I’m not a wuss!” He hadn’t used the word, but I was certain he was thinking it. I grabbed the helmet from him and placed it over my head. Just as I’d thought. Way too big.

“Let me.” Griff shifted the helmet to sit better on my head. “Now you look badass.” He rapped his knuckles on the helmet. “Kind of.”

“Let’s just go.”

The sooner I was home, the sooner I could forget all about this nightmare.

Griff threw one leg over the motorcycle and sat. He patted the seat behind him and held out his hand. “Come on up.”

I took a deep breath and hopped onto the bike and squeaked when I landed hard on the seat and might have bruised my balls a little.

“You okay back there?”

“Yes.”

“Put your arms around me.”

I pulled my hands into my chest. “What?”

“Hold on to me, Scottie, or you’ll fall.”

“Oh.” If only I could throw away my brain and order another on special delivery. One that was Griff-resistant. My brain hadn’t been functioning right since he showed up on my doorstep.

I slipped my arms around him cautiously. Griff gripped them, his hands now covered by leather gloves. I missed the skin-to-skin contact. He wrapped them around his middle, the action sliding me forward until I was plastered against his back.

“There we go,” he said. “Hang on tight.”

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# Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

loss of your furniture for a few days; others would come, and I should not have the money to deal with them."

"What am I to do?" she wailed, clinging to her child.

"Mrs. Parrot's house will be your home for the present. We must wait until we get news of Mr. Conway."

"Oh, Mr. Hampden, is he not cruel to have left me in this position! No one knows but God what I have endured during the last year! When I was battling with poverty alone I was happier and richer. My memories were fresh and pure, my conscience was clear, but I sacrificed them for Nelly's sake, and now I am deserted and the most miserable woman in the whole world!"

She broke into a long piteous cry, but no tears came into her eyes.

"Let me take you at once from this wretched home. Come!"

He went to the door and held it open. Dolly stared around her like a sleeper suddenly aroused, and then rose with the child in her arms. Holdsworth called to the servant and told her to fetch her mistress's hat. The "man in possession" lounged out of the back room and stared with a dry smile.

"Goin'?" he asked.

Holdsworth did not answer him. The weight of the child was too great for the half-fainting mother, who tottered as she stood. Holdsworth took Nelly from her and placed her on the ground.

"You ain't a goin', missis, are yer?" said the servant, handing Dolly the hat, and whimpering.

"Yes," replied Holdsworth; "and if Mr. Conway should call, tell him that his wife is at Mrs. Parrot's."

"Oh, mum, I don't like to be left alone with that man!" cried the servant, looking down the passage.

"Vy not?" said the man. "If you're all goin', who's to cook my wittles, I should like to know?"

"I'll not stop!" exclaimed the girl. "I wouldn't trust myself anear him."

"You're free to stop or go, as you please," said Holdsworth, giving her some money.

"Then I ain't to be paid out arter all?" exclaimed the man, striking a match, and holding it flaming in one hand and his pipe in the other.

"Not by me," answered Holdsworth, opening the hall-door.

He took Nelly's hand and gave Dolly his arm. She drew a long quivering sob as she passed through the garden; and then, seeing some inquisitive faces staring over the wire-blinds in the opposite house, hung her head and stepped out quickly.

Mrs. Parrot, hearing them come in, ran out of the kitchen, and stood looking from one to the other of them in mute astonishment.

"Mrs. Conway will make a temporary home of your house, Mrs. Parrot," said Holdsworth. "You will kindly prepare a bed-room for her and Miss Nelly, and place your drawing-room at her disposal."

Dolly had sunk into a chair. He poured out some wine and held it to her, but she waved it away, striving to suppress her sobs.

"Oh, ma'am, pray don't take on so," cried Mrs. Parrot, going up to her. "Things'll come right, ma'am. You'll be heasy an' comfortable here."

Holdsworth knelt on a chair beside her, holding the wine. Oh, it was hard that he could not take her to his heart and whisper the word that would change all her anguish into joy. But if ever the barrier that was raised between them had been felt, it was felt by him then. Her honour now, more than ever it had been, was become peculiarly his care. The sense of her being another's, that his own claims were as naught in the presence of her belief that she was Conway's wife, was never before so sharply felt. Her misery had given her in his eyes a sanctity that made his yearning love sacrilegious. Humility conquered emotion, and he crept away from her side, and stood looking at her from a distance, holding Nelly's hand.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Parrot's fingers were busy with Dolly's hat strings and the shawl over her shoulders, and she murmured incessantly all manner of kindly sentences, of which their extreme triteness as consolatory axioms was greatly qualified by her motherly manner.

"There, my dear," she exclaimed, laying the hat upon the table, "drink a little wine: you'll be better presently. Life's full o' troubles, God knows! and there are husbands in this world as is enough to make a woman forget her sect and strike 'em. But a friend, ma'am, is as good as sunshine to a frost-bitten man, and I'm sure you've got a good and kind one in Mr. Hampden."

"It's my husband's desertion," cried Dolly, "that I think of. I don't mind the loss of my home. But to think of *his* deserting me and my little one when he *could* not know that I had a friend—when I married him for Nelly's sake, to get her bread. Yes, Mrs. Parrot, to save her from starving. And to feel that I defied my conscience only to be brought so low—*so* low!"

"God forbid, my dear, that iver *I* should set husband an' wife agin' each other," replied Mrs. Parrot, glancing at Holdsworth, to see how he might relish her remark; "but I *must* say that, if Mr. Conway's left yer, it's a good thing, an' the last thing on this airth as would trouble me if I was you. You've gone through a deal o' sufferin' for him, an' if he's desairted you, you can't come to worse harm nor was he to have stood by his home like a man, which he niver was; and there's not one o' your neighbours as don't know that you've had more trouble than any Christian woman i' this world ought to have. And it may sound a hard sayin', but if he's gone," she exclaimed, looking defiantly at Holdsworth, "I hope and pray it's for good an' all."

It often happens in real life, as in books, that a closing remark will take a weird appropriateness by the sudden confrontment of the fact of which it is only the shadow. Mrs. Parrot had barely shut her mouth when the passage echoed with the clattering of the knocker on the house-door. Never was such a delirious knocking. Mrs. Parrot turned pale, persuaded that Mr. Conway had come home drunk, and

had reeled across to her house to demand his wife and create a horrible "scene."

Dolly raised her head, and it was plain that the same idea had occurred to her, by the indescribable expression of mingled hate, fear, and loathing that entered her face.

Mrs. Parrot giving her moral organisation a twist, ran out. Scarcely had she opened the door when in burst Martha, the servant from over the way.

"Oh, missis! oh, missis!" she screeched, "what do you think? Master's drowned! O Lord! Where's Mrs. Conway? He's dead an' gone! Here's the gent as brought the noos. Oh, sir, please tell the missis here!"

She turned, and in her excitement caught hold of the sleeve of a little stout man who stood behind, and literally dragged him forward.

"Let go, you fool! What are you a doing of? Are you Mrs. Conway?" he asked of Mrs. Parrot, who stood staring with wide-open eyes, grasping her dress as if she were only waiting to take a deep breath before tearing herself in two.

"No, she ain't! This ain't Mrs. Conway!" cried the excited Martha.

"You told me she was here!" exclaimed the man.

"So she is; ain't she, missis?"

"Great 'iven! what a clatterin'!" cried Mrs. Parrot, recovering her tongue. "What is it you've got to say, sir?"

"Why, this," answered the little man, who was evidently a very irritable little man—"Mr. Conway's body was found in the river this morning at a quarter before seven, and he's lying now in the Town Hall, and I've come to give the news; and curse me if ever I'll undertake such a job again, if I am to be mauled about by such a fool as this when I'm out of breath, and fit to drop with perspiration."

"Mrs. Parrot! Mrs. Parrot!" called Holdsworth.

The half-distracted woman ran into the sitting-room, where the first thing she saw was Dolly in a dead faint, lying upon the sofa, with Holdsworth kneeling by her side.

"She overheard your voices!" he exclaimed, turning up a face as white as death. "Pray God the shock may not kill her. Look to her, Mrs. Parrot, I *must* speak to the man outside."

He jumped up and left the room, and found the little irritable man in the act of walking away.

"I beg your pardon. One moment!" he cried, running out after him. "Pray excuse my agitation—you have brought shocking news. Is it *indeed* true?"

The little man turned and took in Holdsworth from head to foot, and answered: "It is true, sir. I've seen the body myself. It's in the Town Hall. He's been in the water all night, the doctor says."

"All night?"

"He was found by a man named Williamson. They all knew who he was when they saw him. He must have been drunk when he fell into the water, for the path was wide enough for a horse and cart. Dr. Tanner asked me to step round with the news as he heard I was coming this way. Good morning."

The little man nodded and walked away. Had Dolly been a rich man's wife, a sympathetic deputation, introduced by the churchwardens, might have made a procession to her house to break the news gently, but how can you expect sympathy for the wife of a man who dies owing everybody money?

Holdsworth was stunned, and stood for some moments staring idly from the porch. He then returned hastily to Dolly's side.

"She's comin' to, sir," said Mrs. Parrot, slapping the poor girl's hand, and expending what breath she had upon the cold white forehead. "What awful noos, sir!... Conway dead! I can't believe it. And drowned, too! Oh, poor wretch!"



"Hush!" exclaimed Holdsworth.

Dolly had opened her eyes, and was staring blindly at him. He moistened his handkerchief with water on the sideboard and pressed it to her head. Nelly stood at the window gazing at her mother with a look of wistful fear in her face. At the door was Martha's countenance, seamed with lines of perspiration, her mouth open, and her hair hanging like a string of young carrots over her forehead.

---

"I feel very weak," muttered Dolly, striving to sit upright, but falling back.

"Something terrible has happened. Ah! Robert is dead!"

The memory rushed upon her like a spasm, and she spoke in a cry.

"Come, my dear, don't try to speak yet," said Mrs. Parrot.

"Where is Nelly?"

Holdsworth led the child to the sofa. The mother looked at her little girl, opened her arms, and burst into tears.

"Thank God for that!" said Holdsworth, turning away. Watching her face as her consciousness had dawned, he had felt that, if tears did not relieve her, her heart would break.

## **CHAPTER XXXI.**

### **HUSBAND AND WIFE.**

The little irritable man had brought true news. The report was all over the town: everybody was talking of Conway's death. A woman living in the road called upon Mrs. Parrot to give her the story, not knowing that Mrs. Conway was within. Her husband had met Williamson, the man who found Conway, and had got the account from him clear of all exaggeration.

It was just this: Williamson was a carpenter, and was walking to Thorrold Marsh to execute a repairing job at a house there. He was this side of Hanwitch, just by the bridge facing Squire Markwell's place, when he saw a human hand sticking out of the water. He peered and saw a man lying on his back, the water half a foot above his face, showing the drowned figure as plainly as if it were under glass. Williamson pulls off his coat, tucks up his shirt-sleeves, catches hold of the hand, and up comes the body like a cork. The moment he had the body ashore he knew who it was; left his bag of tools on the bank, and ran as hard as his legs would carry him into the town to give the alarm. The inspector and two constables, and a couple of men with a stretcher belonging to the Town Hall, start out of the High Street and are conducted by Williamson to the body. A crowd gathers about the tail of the procession, the body is put on the stretcher, covered up, and carried to the Town Hall in the sight of a multitude large enough to diffuse the news through the length and breadth of Hanwitch in ten minutes.

So dead Mr. Conway was, if ever a man was dead in this world; and now, the woman told Mrs. Parrot, people were only waiting for the coroner's inquest, to learn how he came by his death.

But the verdict, however it might run, would be inconclusive, since there were no witnesses to show how Conway fell into the water. But this much was known; that yesterday Conway had called at the "Three Stars" and ordered a fine dinner to be got ready for him, with champagne and the best of wines; and to let the landlord understand that he meant what he said, he pulled out a handful of sovereigns and let them fall into his pocket again, chink! chink! When dinner was done, he left the house intoxicated, and what became of him the "Three Stars" didn't know; but the "Pine Apple" did, for he came there in the afternoon and squeezed himself behind the bar, made love to the barmaid, drank some tumblers of rum, and got into an abusive argument with an ostler, whose eye he threatened to blacken if he contradicted him again. On which he was turned out.

That was his day's history, so far as it was recorded in human knowledge. The rest could be guessed; and the public were not slow in explaining their theories. Of course he was drunk, had rolled into the water, and was too senseless to get out again, though the water where he lay was not above two and a half feet deep.

Nobody cared twopence about his death. It gave the shop-people something to talk about until customers dropped in, and then it was, "What's the next article?" and Conway was forgotten. When a bubble explodes upon the surface of a stream, nothing mourns. The tide rolls on just the same, with sunshine or darkness in its breast, as the case may be; the pikes lose no jot of their voracity, and gudgeons swim into their maws; the minnows jump at the flies. Shall law, commerce, or anything else stop because a drunkard is drowned? Cover him up; let him hide his face until the pale jury come to take a peep; then pop him out of sight in a hole, and get back as fast as we may to dinner.

But there were two persons on whose destiny this man's death was to exercise an influence as wonderful, and gracious, and beneficial, as though, instead of a dead drunkard, he was a good spirit—an angel charged with a mission of love, sent by God Himself to work

out and complete the happiness of the man who had been heavily tried, but who, in his bitterest trial, had never been found wanting.

And I truly think that for such men—men who in their sorrow reverentially bow their heads and say, “God knows, I believe in Him; He shall lead me as a little child”—who murmur not, but, praising their Heavenly Father always, make their actions a profound heroism by obeying His voice in all seasons, not more faithfully in moments of joy than in moments of anguish—for such men we shall seldom err in prophesying a time in their lives when the heat of the day shall be shaded from them, and their burden and their conflict removed. “O man, greatly beloved, go thou thy way till the end; for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of thy days.”

Dolly had asked to be left alone with her child. Deeming Holdsworth a stranger, she had felt the restraint of his presence upon her, deeply as she was moved by his goodness. Her heart ached: misery had mastered her. The mere sense of having found a friend in this her time of piteous need could not suffice her. More was imperative: communion with God, communion with the husband who, she believed, looked down upon her from Heaven. To no mortal eyes could she lay bare the exquisite grief that lacerated her heart; and though she should find no comfort even in the Heaven she turned to, yet her full and poignant misery demanded escape in words and tears, and she asked to be left alone.

Holdsworth entered the room facing his own apartment. This was Mrs. Parrot’s drawing-room. Here she had a piano; here she had some wonderful stuffed birds under glass shades; here she herself sat on Sundays with her mother, when her house was unoccupied.

He struggled to calm himself, that he might master and appreciate all the significance of the position in which he was placed by the sudden death of Conway. But his moods were wild and hurrying; the play of emotion was quick and painful. He saw his wife in her grief; he saw her wrestling, with no eye but her child’s upon her, with the anguish that filled her; he felt her loneliness: he felt the cruel hopelessness that weighed in her heart as lead; he felt, above all,

the dreadful sense of degradation which must attend her reflections upon the death of her husband, Conway; upon the wretched, miserable life she had led with him; upon the complete and bitter reversal of the sole end for which she had married him.

The barrier that divided them was gone. Could there be any scruple now to hold him back from her? If there yet lingered one feeling of delicacy to prompt him to delay his confession for a little, until the dead was buried, until something of the horror of the sudden death had yielded to time, should it not be removed by the knowledge of her misery, which he had it in his power to dissipate and turn to gladness? Why should she weep? Why should she feel one instant of pain, when he could change her tears to smiles, her grief to joy?

He stole to the door of the room she was in and listened. He heard her sobbing, and that sound vanquished his last hesitation.

He turned the handle gently and entered. She was on her knees beside the sofa, her arms twined about Nelly, her face buried in the child's lap. She started, looked at him, and rose slowly to her feet. He approached and stood before her.

"Will you not trust me as a friend?" he said, in a voice a little above a whisper.

She tried to answer him, but her sobs choked her voice. He seated himself and took Nelly on his knee, and, whilst he smoothed the child's hair, continued: "There *is* hope, there *is* comfort for you and this little one. Check your sobs and listen to me. I can give you comfort, for I have known what it is to lose one that is dearer to me than my heart's blood, to lose her and to find her again. She was my wife, and I left her to go to sea. The ship I sailed in was wrecked, and for many days I lay consumed with hunger and thirst in an open boat, seeing miserable creatures like myself dying around me one by one. And when I was rescued my memory was gone; I could not remember my own name, my home, the wife I had left, the country I had sailed from. But the voice of God one day directed me to leave Australia and go to England. I reached London, and there a man

spoke to me of Hanwitch, a name familiar and dear to me for my wife's sake. And when I came to Southbourne, the beloved old village gave me back my memory. I knew whom I had come to seek, and what I had lost. They told me that my wife thought me dead, and was married and lived with my child here—in this road—in that house yonder! O Dolly! O wife!"

Her sweet sad face, as he continued speaking, had been slowly upturning to his, and, when their eyes met, he put the little child upon the floor and stretched out his arms, crying, "O Dolly! O wife!"

But she!

There was a look of petrification, stranger and more awful even than death, upon her face; her eyes glared, her lips were parted: and to have seen her thus stirless, thus white, thus staring, thus breathless, you would have said that she was dead, even as she sat there.

Then the life leaped into her, she started from the sofa with a loud hysterical laugh, and flung herself on her knees before him, crying, "John! John!"

"Dolly!"

"John! John!" she repeated; and she brought his hand to her eyes, and stared at it; and then grasped his knees and raised her face to his, talking to herself in hurried, inaudible whispers, and fixing a piercing gaze upon him.

"John! John!" she cried out again.

He put his arms around her, and would have pressed her to his heart, but she kept herself away with her hand against his breast, preserving that keen, unwinking, steadfast, wonderful gaze.

"Do you not know me, Dolly?" he cried. "Look at me closely; hear my voice! hear me tell you of the old dear times! We were to meet in the summer, do you remember, Dolly? and we were never more to part; and you were to keep a calendar and mark off the days. O God! what weary days—what endless days to both of us! And do you remember the walks we took the day before we parted, down by the

river, where I sat and cried in your arms because the sight of your sorrow broke me down and I had no more comfort to give you?"

But still she would not let him clasp her. Still she kept her hand pressed against him, and her eyes, now growing wild and unreal with fear, upon his face.

"O God!" he cried in his agony. "Will she not know me? Has my secret come upon her too suddenly? Darling! darling! I could not see your tears, I could not hear your sobs, I could not feel the desolation and misery that was breaking your heart, and still keep myself hidden from you. Oh, bitter has the trial been to watch you—to know you to be mine—to see my little child—and to be as a stranger to you! Call me John! Call me husband! Speak to me, Dolly! Tell me that no change that pain and suffering have made in me can disguise me from your love!"

She released herself from his arms and sprang a yard away from him; and there, as she stood transfixed, watching him with large, steady eyes, her dishevelled hair about her forehead, her hands clenched, and her head inclined forward, she looked like a marble figure of madness, her habiliments carven to the life.

She had thought him dead. For many, many months she had prayed to him as one in Heaven. Did she know him now? Yes, but as a dead man might be known—with unspeakable fear and unspeakable love; with the horror of superstition and the passion of deep affection.

Thus they stood for awhile, their eyes fixed on each other: then a heavy sigh broke from him; he turned to his child.

"Nelly, my little one, come to me! I am thy father!"

He extended his arms. The action and words broke the spell. With an indescribable cry Dolly fled to him.

"John! John!" she murmured. "My husband—my very own! Come back to me from the dead! Come back to me after all this cruel waiting!"

And then she broke from him again, and watched him yet again from a distance, then ran and flung her arms around his neck, crying, "John! John! Why did you not come to me before? why did you not come to me before?"

The hot tears were streaming down his cheeks now: he held her tightly, saying, in broken tones:

"We are together—never more to part. I am thy very husband! I have loved thee always! Oh, God be praised, the merciful God be praised for this!"

"Nelly, Nelly!" she cried; and she ran from him and seized her child, and held her up.

"She is ours, John! our little one! We have found papa, Nelly! There he is! There is Nelly's papa! God has given him back to us—we were broken-hearted just now ... O husband! ... husband!"

She broke down; a dangerous excitement had up to this moment sustained her. She sank into a weeping, sobbing, fainting woman in a moment; but his arms received her, his breast pillowed her, and there she rested for many minutes, with no sound to break the holy silence that filled the room but his deep quivering sobs.

---

When we peep at them again, a half-hour has passed, and the wife is seated near the husband with her arm around him; and the child is on her father's knee. The fear that threw a film upon the exquisite emotions of the girl has passed; she is listening to his story, interrupting him often with quick exclamations of distress, then fondling him and listening again, vibrating with eagerness, with love, with amazement, which makes her pale face kaleidoscopic with expression. He is telling her of his sufferings in the boat, of his rescue, of his friends in Australia, of his return to England, of his arrival at Southbourne; and as she hears him tell the story of his noble unselfishness—how, to save her from the sorrow and the



shame that must have attended his disclosure, if made while Conway lived, he held his secret, but could not keep his love from going forth to his child—she knows that he has brought back to her the same grand heart he took with him five years ago; the same magnanimous qualities; the same pure impulses; the same heroic capacity of self-sacrifice.

And then she tells him her story; and now it is for him to soothe her with the love that has transformed his face and made it beautiful with a deeper and subtler beauty than it had ever before worn. For, as she recurs to those piteous times of her distress, her tears gush forth afresh and her eyes grow wild, as though she did not believe in the happiness that had come to her at last.

I see them sitting in that room while the bright morning sunshine pours upon the window and floods the floor with its radiance; I hear the birds singing merrily in the garden, and the cosy chucking of the hens and the sound of the fresh sweet wind as it sweeps through the pear-trees and sends the red-edged leaves rustling to the ground.

I see the child's large deep eyes wandering from father to mother, from mother to father, with the small face busy with the unformed consciousness that struggles in it.

I see the mother careworn and pale, but with the light of rapture on her face that discloses all its secret sweetness, watching, ever watching, with soft eyes shining with happy tears, the dear one whose arm is around her.

I see Holdsworth with the patches of gray upon his hair, his sunken cheeks and bowed figure symbolising while his life shall hold the unspeakable sufferings of mind and body he has known since we first beheld him. I see him, with the calmness of perfect joy mellowing his eyes, and enriching his face with a colour that owes its lustre to the spirit, so that it shall be there in darkness and in sunshine, holding his wife to his heart, often pressing his lips to his

child, often glancing upwards with looks of ineffable gratitude; and I think of those two lines which Goldsmith says are worth a million:

*"I have been young, and now am old: yet never saw I the righteous man forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread."*

---

A knock falls upon the door; the door is opened, and enter Mrs. Parrot. Does she start dramatically? I promise you there is more genuine astonishment conveyed by the little jump she gives, as she falls back a step and then stands staring, than in any movement designed to express wonderment you will see performed on the stage.

So the mystery is solved, is it? So her lodger isn't a gentleman after all, but an insidious man who, under pretence of liking Nelly's company, has been paying attention to mamma! and now, with Conway's body lying in the Town Hall, dead only a few hours, is actually caressing the widow in Mrs. Parrot's respectable house!

Holdsworth and Dolly exchange glances, and Dolly hangs her head with a look of confusion on her face (and well she may, thinks Mrs. Parrot) as Holdsworth puts Nelly down and rises.

"I am really sorry to introod," says Mrs. Parrot haughtily, "but my motive for knockin', sir, was to inquire when you would like your breakfast sarved?"

"We'll talk of that in a moment," answers Holdsworth. "I have something to say to you. This lady is my wife!"

"I beg your parding," says Mrs. Parrot, growing very pale.

"My wife, Mrs. Parrot. You have heard of Mr. Holdsworth who went to sea and was drowned? He was not drowned. I am Mr. Holdsworth!"

"You!"

She tottered, ran forward, grasped the table, and shrieked, "You!"

"Yes, Mrs. Parrot," exclaimed Dolly, "this is John—my own darling husband, who I thought was dead."

"And do you mean to say, sir," gasped Mrs. Parrot hysterically, "that you knew who you was yourself all the time?"

"All the time that I have lodged with you."

"An' you've seen your lawful wife day arter day without speakin' of it, or sayin' who you was?"

"Yes."

"Because," stammered Mrs. Parrot, still clinging to the table, "because you says that a wife can't have two husbands, and so you hid yourself that you might spare her feelin's?"

"Yes, that is why, Mrs. Parrot," cried Dolly.

Mrs. Parrot took a deep breath, and then, to the amazement of the others, burst into tears.

"Oh, sir, I can't help it," she sobbed. "I niver did hear in all my life of such beautiful conduct. Niver .. And is this your child?... Why, of course it is! Oh dear! who'd ha' thought that any mortal man could ha' acted so nobly! Oh, sir, let me shake your hand."

She not only shook his hand, but actually fell against him and kissed him; and then, overwhelmed with her effrontery and her feelings, was rushing out of the room, when Holdsworth stopped her.

"One moment, dear Mrs. Parrot. You are the only person in Hanwitch—in the world I may say—who knows our secret. Will you keep it? We have many reasons for not wishing it known."

"I will, sir, I promise you," blubbered the honest woman, "since you ask me; but if it wasn't for that I'd go and spread the noos everywhere, I would, for I niver heerd of such beautiful conduct before, niver, in sarmons or anywheers else; and it 'ud be the makin'

of many a man to be told of it. God bless you both, I'm sure. God bless you, little gal. You've found a good father—a rare good father!”

And out she ran choking.

---

So the curtain falls, for the end has come. No need to raise it again, for you who have sat so kindly and patiently through this little drama must know as well as I what will become of the two chief characters and their little one when they have made their bow and withdrawn. Australia is before them, with generous friends to welcome them to their new home, and listen with interest and tenderness to their strange story of bitter separation, and sweet and sacred reunion.

Enough has been written; the quill that has driven these creations to this point is but a stump; the hand that holds it is tired; the companionship of the shadows which have kept me company is broken. What fitter time, then, than now to say good-bye?

## POSTSCRIPT.

I must claim the reader's indulgence while I speak for a moment of that portion of the foregoing narrative which refers to the hero's loss of memory.

That loss of memory has been brought about by trials and sufferings such as I have attempted to depict in the early chapters of this narrative, is too certain to make it necessary that I should adduce instances (which are very readily procured) as proof. That such loss has lasted, not for months only, but for years, will be seen by the following anecdote, which suggested this story, and which I extract from the *Noon Gazette* of July, 1772:—

"Last Sunday died at Winchelsea a character of whom a correspondent, a gentleman distinguished both by his parts and benevolence, has obligingly furnished us with the following account: That his name was *William Stephens*, and that he was a mariner, who, many years since, was pressed from his home to serve on board His Majesty's ship of war *The Vapour*; that he was then married but two weeks; that whilst cruising off the Portugal coast *The Vapour* was wrecked, and *Stephens*, with some others, saved his life by clinging to a portion of the wreck, in which condition they languished near three days, and were then rescued by a French merchant-man, who carried them into *Bordeau* (*sic*): that on *Stephens* being questioned, he was found to have lost his memory, on which he was sent into England, and was hired as porter by *Mr. Hudson*, of the *York Inn*, in or near to *Folkestone*, in *Kent*, where he remained for two years in entire ignorance of his past, until, his memory returning, he set off for Winchelsea on foot, and arrived to find his wife married to one *Eel*, a cobbler, whose life *Stephens* threatened if he did not restore him his *Nancy*. This the cobbler did,

and so the matter ended. It occasioned much gossip, and to the end of his days Mr. Stephens (who settled down as a carpenter, having lost all relish for the sea) was regarded with curiosity, and had to the houses of the neighbouring gentry, whom his singular story never failed to divert."

There are on record many instances of loss of memory, occasioned by various means. In some cases the deprivation has been complete, and the restoration sudden, and resembling an abrupt revelation. In other instances it has been accompanied by faint, glimmering, haunting reminiscences, creating indescribable anxiety, but growing up suddenly into a sound and permanent recovery.

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# Footnotes

[1]

"Famine, despair, cold, thirst, and heat had done  
Their work on them by turns, and thinn'd them to  
Such things a mother had not known her son  
Amidst the skeletons of that gaunt crew."

*Don Juan*, Canto ii. 102.

[2] "In a little time I and my family and  
friends came to a right understanding: but  
my wife protested 'I should never go to sea  
any more;' although my evil destiny so  
ordered, that she had not the power to  
hinder me."

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